

She rolls to conquer

BY CONRAD MCCALLUM

MALJO

Featuring Canboulay Dance Theatre.
Choreography by Ronald Taylor. Dec 12-14. Thu-Sat 8pm. \$17-\$25, \$15 for groups of 10 or more. Betty Oliphant Theatre, 404 Jarvis. 416-366-7723.

Maljo is a show featuring Caribbean folk dance, modern African ballet and dance from a wheelchair. The last item on the list tends to overshadow the first two, which both unnerves and reassures Spirit Synott, the show's lone dancer on wheels. It's a welcome sign that the social comment she makes through her innovative dance — regarding the miscon-

ceptions that hold back people with disabilities — cannot fail to stand out. And yet, too much recognition of her part, or the very novelty of it, takes something away from the artistic whole. Created by Ronald Taylor, artistic director of Canboulay Dance Theatre, the piece is widely symbolic, but its loose storyline is about blacks overcoming racial injustice, and Synott happens to be the only white performer in a group of seven. So could her agenda about disability upstage one about race?

"This is not about the wheelchair," the Toronto dancer says good-humouredly, denying that *Maljo* has a split focus. Instead, the show explores

an analogy between prejudice about people with disabilities and the evils of racism. These are only two of the demons — cultural, historical, psychological — the dancers exorcise in *Maljo* (a Creole word that roughly translates to "mean spirit"). Their journey expresses the healing power of dance and imagines an idealized place of tolerance and celebration.

Synott has battled unspoken prejudices living with spina bifida, a debilitating spinal cord condition she's had since birth. Through her career in painting and drawing (she graduated with honours from the Ontario College of Art), as well as her dancing, modeling, acting and martial arts instruction, she has defied the doubting Thomases.

At 16, when she lost the ability to walk without assistance, she remained convinced that the art form least accessible to her would become her most powerful mode of expression. "Dance has always been a release for me. It's been a way of dealing with the demons of daily life," says Synott, now 38, as she sips a coffee.

She can never completely ignore the double take she gets from passersby. It goes something like this: there's an attractive, athletic, funny, blue-eyed blond sitting over there and, oops, that looks like a wheelchair beside her. Synott says it's still hard for a lot of people to look at someone in a wheelchair and see an artistic, emotional, creative or sexual side to them.

Onstage, she relies on her upper body, with movements that often take her out of her chair. When she is seated

(about half the time), the chair becomes a kind of twisting second dancer with its own choreography. "I want [the chair] to be stilettos, you know. I want it to be sexy. I don't want people to see it as a death sentence."

Her mother, Isabel Synott, taught tap, jazz dance and acrobatics to her five able-bodied children, but in a bizarre twist it was her sixth child, Marie, who became the one to dance professionally. While she's persevered, it hasn't been easy living up to the name "Spirit" she officially adopted very early in her career. "My disability is not about me," Synott says. "It's about how others interact with me, how others see me."

Choreographer Taylor, who founded Canboulay and has won acclaim for his multi-layered dance experiments with African music rhythms, immediately identified with Synott's creative approach when the two met as guest dancers at a festival last spring. He invited Synott on board, and they began to build on the techniques she'd developed through studio work and from her solo and ensemble performances at the Fringe Festival of Independent Dance Artists, SummerWorks and Mayworks. "I'm amazed at what she can do for herself," says Trinidad-born Taylor. "She's the kind of woman who says, 'Let's go for it. If it doesn't work, let's try something else.'"

Besides sharing a take-no-prisoners approach to dance creation, Taylor knew Synott would touch on the show's core themes. In a two-hander they perform together in *Maljo*, Synott's wheelchair becomes much more than a prop, as Taylor hoists Synott and this "third dancer" above his head. "We both have that ability to surpass barriers,



Spirit Synott (bottom left) and Ronald Taylor with fellow *Maljo* collaborators

ers, and *Maljo* is based on [beating] obstacles, on overcoming affliction."

Maljo builds to an exuberant ensemble finale. Afflictions heal, Taylor suggests, but getting there is arduous work. "We know we need to go back to the river of life to cleanse ourselves of some things. But it's not that easy."

To a drama about the victory of the human spirit, Synott offers her own deeply personal triumph owing to the resilience of the human body. "Society is the disability," says Synott. "Dancing enables." ■

Email letters@eye.net.

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GUEST ARTIST

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